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Review · Wendy Salinger

Scaffolding: New and Selected Poems. Jane Cooper. London: Anvil, 1984. Paper, 127 pp. 4.95, pounds sterling.

Scaffolding: New and Selected Poems, by Jane Cooper won the Maurice English Poetry Award for 1985; Galway Kinnell was the judge. In it she reprints all but seven of the 32 poems in her first collection, *The Weather of Six Mornings* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969) and all but four of the 35 poems of *Maps & Windows* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1975) where nine of the poems were reprinted from the 1969 collection. The distinction here is that the poems are arranged chronologically, to give the reader, Cooper explains in the foreword, "a sense of the continuous journey the work has been for me all along." To emphasize this sense of journey, she includes five of what she calls "reclaimed poems," from the years 1954–1969, and two previously unpublished poems: "Song" (from the period covering 1947–1951) and "Holding Out" (1970–1973). The years since 1975 are represented in the book's final section by eight short poems and by "Threads," a three-part poem which is based on Rosa Luxemburg's *Prison Letters to Sophie Liebknecht* and which was published by Flamingo Press in 1979 for the benefit of the War Resisters League.

Chronology and dates of composition are important matters to Jane Cooper, who feels her journey as a poet has been very much an interrupted one. The reasons for this are the subject of her essay, "NOTHING HAS BEEN USED IN THE MANUFACTURE OF THIS POETRY THAT COULD HAVE BEEN USED IN THE MANUFACTURE OF BREAD," reprinted here from *Maps & Windows*. Cooper's first book was published when she was in her forties. Had she published the book she wrote in her twenties and then "suppressed," it would have been called *Mercator's World*. The poems that remain from that abandoned book were finally printed in *Maps & Windows* and are the poems that open this collection, under their original title.

Mercator's World, Cooper tells us, was to have been "a book of war poems from a civilian's, a woman's, point of view." But what remains from it are primarily poems about a woman's attempts at relationships with men. They are dominated by the fear of loss of identity, of lack of understanding (being mis-identified), a mistrust of the motives of love.

You ask for love but what you want is healing. . . .

(“Twins”)

Intelligent companion.

Talented—yes, and blind—but can

I live the pitiful part I play?

For what do you see when I

Come to you? Isn’t it a woman,

Passion, a pair of eyes, the ground

To prove old sex and sorrows on?”

(“The Door”)

Too calm to beg for pity yet too strained

Ever to call my bluff or disown me

Openly, you said nothing but remained

Masterful—I thought weak—solitary,

. . . you groped like Samson to be dethroned.

(“Gaza”)

When war is the ostensible subject of a poem, its metaphors are those of copulation (a “phallic parody/ Begat by man on the original sea” in “After the Bomb Tests”) and conception:

Head first, face down, into Mercator’s world

Like an ungainly rocket the child comes,

Driving dead-reckoned outward through a channel

Where nine months back breath was determined

By love, leaving his watery pen

—That concrete womb with its round concrete walls. . . .

(“For a Boy Born in Wartime”)

“The woman’s point of view” is to ask the question: “Whom can we love in all these little wars?” (“Meteors”). The pilot/meteor who burns bright in his fall from the sky or the sailor strapped to his hammock who exists in an element that’s “Heavy and liquid to the touch as night?” In her essay, Cooper tells us these figures represent the artist-lover and the lover who

“promises sexual and family satisfaction.” Added to the other dichotomies in human relationships presented in the early poems is the opposition of a marriage of minds to one of the senses.

Cooper talks a lot in her essay about how the Second World War and its aftermath dominated her imagination and gives us several fragments from her uncompleted poems by way of illustration. Yet the poems we have in full here from those years seem less to be about love pursued against the background of war than about love seen in the terms usually applied to war. Similarly, in the foreword to the present volume, Cooper speaks of the threat of nuclear holocaust and how, in her later poems, she wants “to suggest it through images of all-consuming light, rooms with only a few sticks in them . . . a stripped-down landscape.” But the poems which invoke “this obsession with bare boards:/Scaffolding . . .” (“All These Dreams,” 1967–1983) describe it in personal rather than political terms. This from “The Blue Anchor,” in the book’s final section, “The Flashboat”:

All these years
I’ve lived by necessity.
Now the world shines
like an empty room
clean all the way to the rafters.

Making choices, stripping down the “overfurnished house” of the past to its necessities: this is the journey of a self, the essence of the journey *Scaffolding*, as a whole, outlines. (“Dispossessions,” in fact, is the title given the section that reprints most of the poems from *Maps & Windows*.) Accordingly, the language of this poetry, quiet from the first, grows sparer as the years progress.

The most descriptively generous poems—with the exception of the poem based on Rosa Luxemburg’s letters—come from *The Weather of Six Mornings*. Here the landscape has not yet been denuded, the house not dispossessed. Vistas open to the eye and to the soul. In Jacksonville, Florida (where Cooper lived as a child):

The mind that pastured ankle-deep in flowers
Last night, must wake to sunrise on the river,

Graze wide and then grow vertical as mountains.

("Morning on the St. John's")

She looks back into the eyes of her younger self (a photograph)

To thumping dark paddle-like hyacinth leaves

With blood-brown stems and blue and sucking heads,

To the river's massive purr, its sustained dredge

And flap at the dock stilts (stiff, a heron's legs)—

("Leaving the Water Hyacinths")

In "Rock Climbing," written in Deer Isle, Maine, the eye combs every fissure, examines every inch of moist moss and dying lichen in the liberating climb to that height from which "we address / The Father of our knowledge." (In an intricate, long poem not reprinted from this volume—"Practicing for Death"—butterfly-catching led into territory where "Ribbons of violence / Wove round each naive sense.")

But the beginning of the process of stripping-down is prefigured in these poems, too. What the rock-climbers look back to from their height are "Imaginary Houses." And in the poem that comes next, a young girl tries again and again to build herself a private sanctuary—by a pond, in the attic, in a tree-top—only to have it, each time, invaded, violated: "only for love to scatter / Such long, carefully planned / And sovereign childhood with its disrespectful hand." (In the version originally published "disrespectful" was "unrelenting"—the change perhaps reflecting Cooper's later, more strictly feminist view of her history.) Already the poet is letting go or being let go in poems of deaths and departures: "In the Last Few Moments Came the Old German Cleaning Woman," "For My Mother in her First Illness," "In the House of Dying." With the final, title poem of the *Weather* section of this book, the death of someone from whom she has already parted reduces the writer to the sparest utterances of grief.

The section that follows, "March: A Sequence (1967)," consists of the eight poems which originally opened the 1969 collection. They form an extended elegy—for a person, sometimes for the past itself—and though "the small birds come fluting / from the pines: / *No more elegies! no more elegies!*" the poet knows it's not spring. Her bags have always been packed

in defense against this “air of departures,” and now, in “Middle Age,” she says: “I’m waiting—” but for what?

More renunciation, answer the poems of the “Dispossessions (1970–1973)” section, from *Maps & Windows*. In “Poetry as Continuity,” the writer remembers Zhivago who “in the end . . . (was) scarcely a man.” The “serious possessions” of this existence are divorces (“Holding Out”). In “Suicide Note,” “the telephone is the invader,” and the speaker cries out, “Already I’ve ceased to exist/at my end of the conversation.” The resident of “A Nightmare of the Suburbs” waits in an upstairs room, the door locked, gun ready. The rescue fantasy is violent and sexual, but nobody comes:

no black bodies
rising like night-flowers from your leafy summer streets,
no axe that splits
the drowsy thighbones of your window frame

In such isolation, objects grow alien. They have a life of their own, the poem “Things” tells us—but not in the Rilkean sense of wonder and strangeness leading us deeper into life’s mystery. (This despite the fact that “Inheritances,” one of the poems in this sequence, is, according to Cooper’s notes, “quoted virtually in its entirety” from Herter-Norton’s translation of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.) The independence of objects is ominous, eerie. The lamp lights itself, the piano plays “at will.” They go on without us, after us, were here before us. They seem to disown us. The very houses we inhabit are “husks” where “we are always waking/in bedrooms of the dead, smelling/musk of their winter jackets. . . .” (“Souvenirs”) In the landscape of dispossession the poet waits, estranged even from her own body, which “will never bear children.” A “used violin,” “an empty box,” she calls it.

But suppose you are an empty box?
Suppose you are like that famous wooden music hall
in Troy, New York,
waiting to be torn down
where the orchestras love to play?

Let compassion breathe in and out of you
filling you, singing

(“Waiting”)

Perhaps the soul will sing through the husk, the stripped-down life become a scaffolding for the spirit. There's a hint of this in "Flashboat," the book's final section of the ten poems from the years 1975–1983, but it remains only a hint. Perhaps this is partly because of the mystical nature of this kind of expectation. More clearly, it's because the language of these poems is almost, to borrow a phrase from one of them, "picked clean." There are poets—like Hopkins, Roethke—in whom the Spirit shakes loose a torrent of words. This is not the case with Jane Cooper. Her poetry, understated and unadorned by nature, becomes more so in reaching toward the transcendent. With only one real exception, "Threads," the poems ask more of the silences around them, the white spaces, than they deliver in words. This is masked in "A Mission with the Night" and "Conversation by the Body's Light" by the use of incantation, but the repeated lines don't have real liturgical power. The poem describing a fifteenth-century painting called "Jittoku, a Buddhist Mystic, Laughing at the Moon" tells us that everything in the picture is wind-blown, but the gusts don't carry past the poem. In "Rent," "A Flute Song," and "The Blue Anchor," space is barely inhabited. The title poem, "Flashboat," has a little more flesh on it, with its description of shipwreck:

A high deck. Blue skies overhead. White distance.
 The wind on my tongue. A day of days. From the shore a
 churchbell clangs.
 Below me the grinding of floes: tiny families huddled together
 earth-colored. Let me explain, the ice is cracking free.
 They were cut off unawares. From the shore a churchbell clangs.
 When the ice breaks up it is spring. No
 comfort, no comfort.

There are two rescues offered at the end of this poem: one a large, safe boat for the women which the captain will command, the other small and precarious, bobbing in the light, its oars gripped by black hands. The poet cries out in a voice consistent in "its crunch of bone . . ."

*I choose
 the flashboat!*
 work,
 the starry waters

And we have a glimpse of the next stage of the journey: more life, more writing.

In the 1979 poem, “Threads: Rosa Luxemburg from Prison,” the poet seems to have been liberated from her own constraint by the subject and by the text of the letters from Luxemburg to the wife of her fellow revolutionary Karl Liebknecht. Speaking as Rosa Luxemburg, Jane Cooper can speak as someone whose “stripped-down” existence is literal. Her forced confinement led Luxemburg to study the world she was being denied: “Natural science . . . the distribution of plants and animals.” And so Jane Cooper turns back to examine creation.

A huge white poplar half fills the prison garden.
All the songbirds love that tree best. The young leaves
sticky all over with a white down
shine in the sun like flowers!
But by now the small birds
(May 23rd) are much too busy to sing.
Hens keep their nests, cocks with their beaks full
streak back and forth. Yesterday—
I caught the *zeezeebey!* of a blue tit
shrilling over the wall.

As Luxemburg, the poet wonders what such abundance signifies for the one locked away from it.

What is the meaning of it all? What is the meaning
of young weeds tufted in the prison wall? young poplar shoots?
underground passages of wasp and wild bee
I try not to shake when I walk? ant highways
straight as the Roman?

What the character of this poem discovers is her own solidarity with the things of the natural world.

Thus passing out of my cell in all directions
are fine threads connecting me
with thousands of birds and beasts

She would send her reader “like a starry cloak/the confident joy I feel.” The poem reaches out to achieve what’s described in “Blind Girl,” one of the “reclaimed” poems from the fifties, where the poet writes that “seeing is something struggling to get out/To something like it, larger but more still.” There’s continuity, as Jane Cooper promises, in the journey *Scaffolding* traces—despite the interruptions at its outset described in the essay reprinted here from *Maps & Windows*.

I don’t find that essay revealing in the ways that it intends to be. Any attempt to make up the myth of oneself is risky; this one makes me feel uncomfortable. From ages 22 to 26, the writer tells us, she worked on a book of poems, then gave up writing poetry altogether and only tried to publish one of the poems. She “suppressed” her work, she says. She’s never married and has no children, but of the obstacles to becoming writers that women face—marriage, the bearing and raising of children, and the lack of “a sense of the earned right to write”—Cooper believes “the last invasion may well be the most serious.” In the essay she reviews the events of her early years to determine the effect it had on her.

As she herself grants, the answers aren’t clear-cut, but, in reading this narrative, I wondered if the problems were, either. Ages 22 to 26 are very young years for a writer. Many poets never publish this soon (or can’t find a publisher); many who do, later discount their early work. This is the time when most writers first confront “the right to write,” what it will really mean to dedicate themselves to their art—a difficult, transforming realization for any writer, if especially for women.

At the end of this period and with the beginning of a full-time teaching career, Cooper stopped writing poems. Quoting extensively from the journal she kept the following year, she documents the doubts she was having about the kind of poems she’d been writing. But a year later she was working on stories and poems at the Iowa Workshop, where Berryman “rushed across the college lawn and . . . began to tell me how to write my poems!” (Fortunately, now there are women at Iowa to tell you how to write your poems.)

Several times during the course of this essay, the author comments on the honesty and acuteness of her poems and journal entries from this time, but in the autobiography of the period, the issues remain obscure. The essay is full of hints about her state of mind—in fragments from still-suppressed poems about war and love, in veiled references to failed “efforts” at relationships, in rhetorical questions.

Is this primarily a political story, having to do with how hard it is for a woman to *feel* the freedom that would let her develop as a writer, even when she has it? Is it a tale of personal neurosis? Or is it simply the history of one individual woman . . .?

I think what she tries to do is to tell the political story without giving away the personal one: we know the forms and shapes but can't be sure what goes where or with what weight, since she has withheld the scaffolding.